

Dhan of the Pearl Country



PHYLLIS AYER SOWERS



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Dhan of the Pearl Country





Margaret Ayer—

Dhan and Mayna live in Ceylon

DHAN

of the

PEARL COUNTRY

By
ms. PHYLLIS AYER SOWERS



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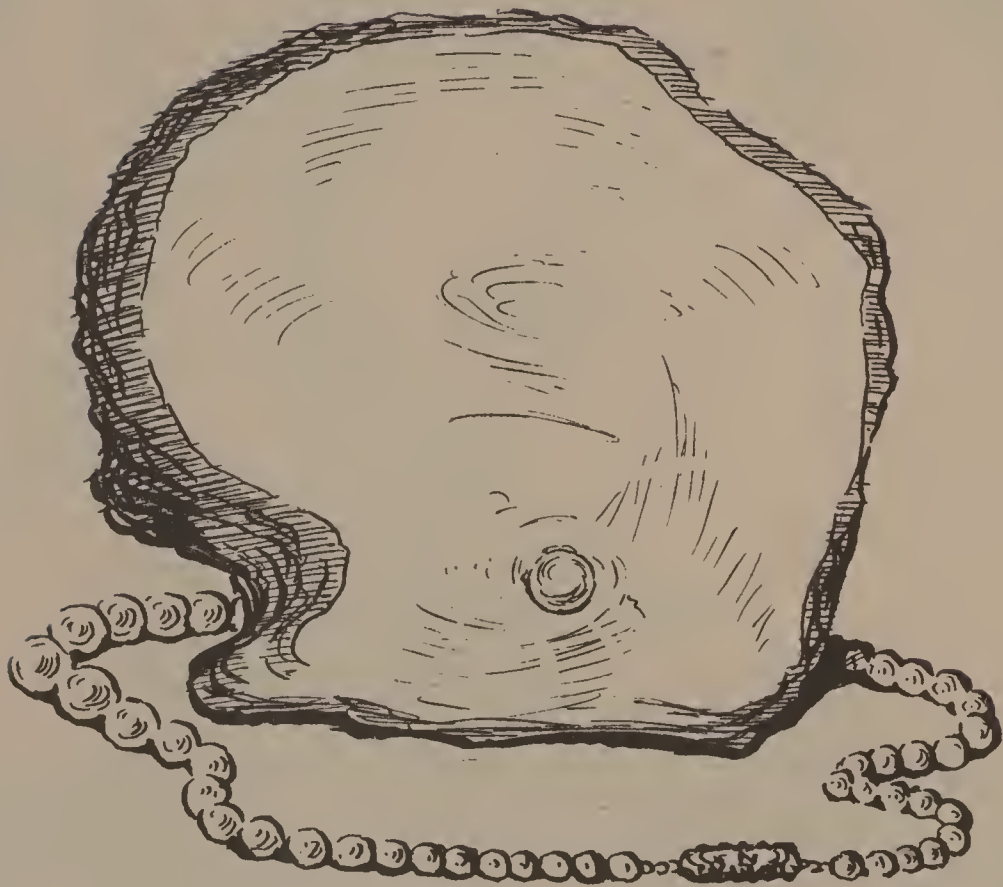
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
Pearl Town	17
The Home under the Coconuts.....	26
Mayna's Oyster	42
With the Gypsies.....	52
Dhan Makes a Friend.....	59
The Iron Dragon.....	73
In the City of the Past.....	87
The Festival of the Sacred Tooth.....	100
The Pearl	113



LIST OF FULL PAGE ILLUSTRATIONS

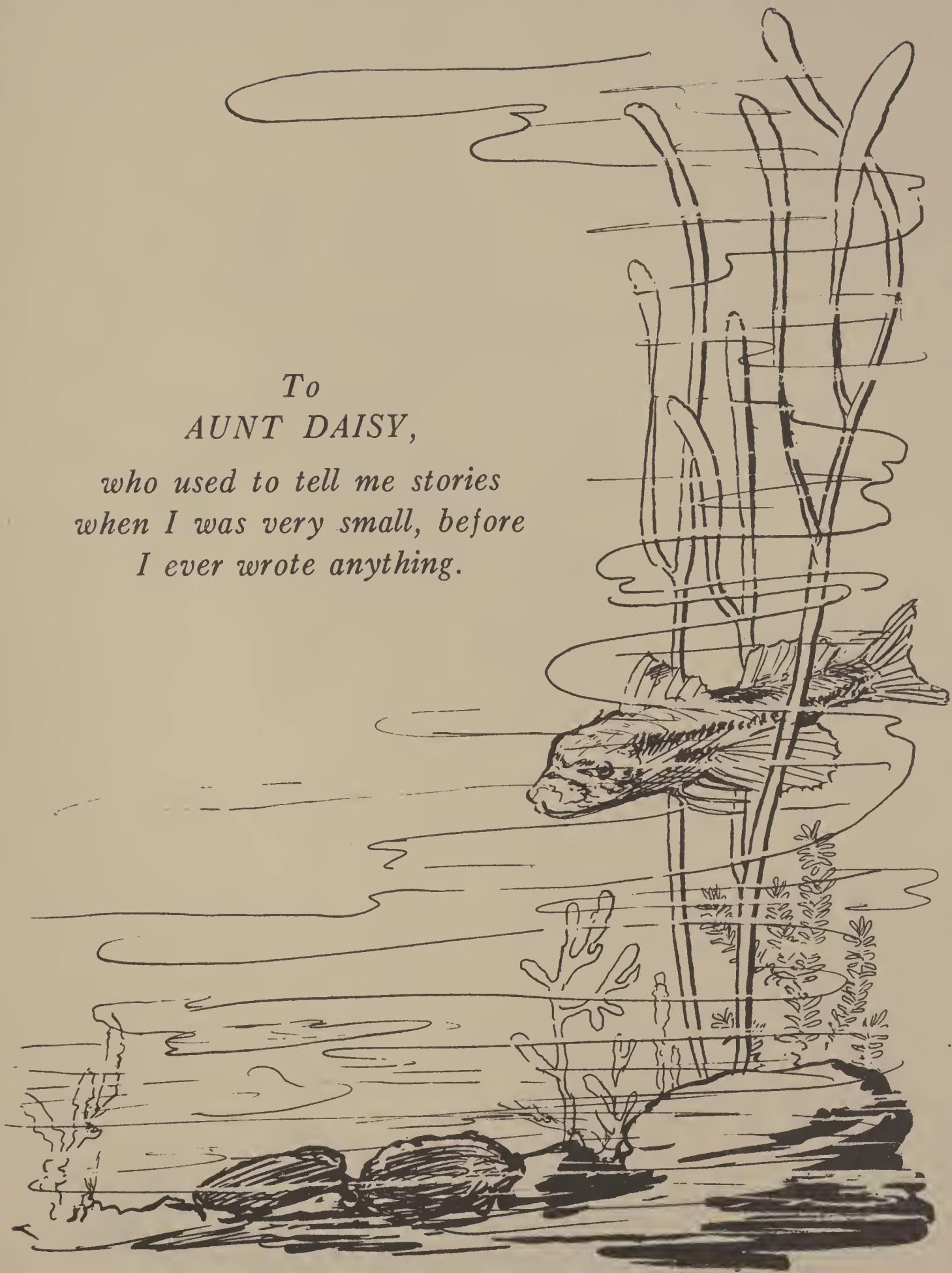
	PAGE
Dhan and Mayna live in Ceylon.....	Frontispiece
All at once life became very busy.....	19
Dhan's father held a basket for oysters.....	23
Dhan was close at his heels.....	31
There were dancers and performing animals.....	35
In a moment Dhan was pounding him heartily.....	39
"Will you give me your pretty earrings?".....	47
"Take care, young Dhan".....	50
"Have a bite of my supper".....	63
"All I smell is curry," muttered Dhan.....	67
Dhan climbed ahead, giving Mayna his hand.....	75
It was the Colombo pearl merchant.....	83

LIST OF FULL PAGE ILLUSTRATIONS
[Continued]

	PAGE
Yellow-robed monks strolled here and there.....	91
“It is time to stop talking and go to bed”.....	95
There were huge, gaily-decked elephants.....	103
He ran after the carriage and jumped on the back.....	107
“Am I not to keep a little for myself?”.....	110
Dhan hid in the next doorway to watch.....	115
He practiced walking back and forth.....	119
He sat down on the well-worn steps to rest.....	123

To
AUNT DAISY,

*who used to tell me stories
when I was very small, before
I ever wrote anything.*



Dhan of the Pearl Country







I

PEARL TOWN

BANG! BANG!

The loud noise of the signal gun rang out on the stillness, rousing everyone in the little Cingalese town from slumber. It awakened Dhan and his sister Mayna. The two children sat up, rubbing their eyes, and Dhan ran quickly to the door of the hut.

Outside it was still dark. Tom-toms were beating, the air was filled with excited voices and the sound of running feet, and torches flickered here and there in the night. Dhan's father had jumped instantly from his sleeping mat and was already at the door.

“What’s happening, Father?”

“It is the signal for the fleet to start for the pearl banks,” his father said. “I must hurry down to the boat that is to take me out. We start diving at dawn.”

“Can’t I come with you?” Dhan begged. “Last year you said I was too young and would be in the way, but I’m big enough now. Please, Father — I’ve never seen you diving for pearls!”

“Come if you like.” His father was already running down the street to the shore. “Maybe the Sahib masters will be angry and won’t let you on the boat,” he called back, “but you can try.”

The opening of the government pearl oyster banks had made a great difference in this little town where Dhan and Mayna lived. All at once life had become very busy and exciting. From all over the country people came flocking, by boat and bullock cart, by car, and even across the water from India. There were sooty black Tamils, brown Cingalese, Indians, Malays, Arabs, and many white men too.

The streets were crowded, and everywhere temporary buildings had been put up. There were hospitals, offices and warehouses, great tanks to store the fresh water needed for drinking and bathing, and hundreds and hundreds of little shacks where the poorer newcomers lived. Many



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All at once life became very busy

people had brought their own palm branches and thatch to make houses, for even the many palms of Pearl Town would not have been enough for all.

Dhan ran beside his father, dodging his way among the crowds of hurrying men, all bound for the shore. Down by the water's edge the stir and bustle was greater than anywhere else. Thousands of brown and black figures, looking like shadows against the flaring light of the torches, ran here and there, busy with tackle, hauling on ropes and swarming on the decks of the fishing boats.

The boat which was to take Dhan and his father out to the fishing bank was painted bright blue. To Dhan's surprise, as soon as they had scrambled on board the first thing his father did was to fling himself down on a corner of the deck. "There will be nothing we need do for an hour or so," he said. "Now I can finish my sleep out!"

Most of the other men on board, Dhan noticed, were doing the same thing. But Dhan didn't feel at all sleepy. Everything around him was too new and exciting. He watched a noisy little tug which was being hooked on to a whole string of *dhoneys* or fishing boats, their own boat among the number. Soon it started towing them out to sea. This was much quicker than going under their own sail. It was about the only change which had been made during

the many centuries since pearl fishing in Ceylon first began.

One by one the men were beginning now to wake up from their naps. Dhan could hear scraps of conversations being carried in several different languages. He gazed dreamily up at the sky. The stars were beginning to pale, and the water changed slowly from black to grey. Just before dawn the fleet was cast loose from the tug. Dhan heard the crew stirring and voices shouting. Then he heard the splash of anchors all about as the fleet came to a stand round the spot where the oyster beds lay below, under the deep water.

There were about fifty men on each boat, and they worked in pairs. Dhan's father took off his shirt and *comboy* — the straight narrow skirt worn by men and women alike in Ceylon — and hung them on the rigging, side by side with the many other bright-colored garments and turbans. Dressed only in a loincloth, he slipped a set of leather guards over his fingers to protect them from the sharp oyster shells, and he walked to the side of the boat.

Many of the divers were Arabs. Dhan noticed that most of them had charms tied about their arms and that each wore a curious-looking nose clip to keep the water out of his nostrils when diving.

"Why don't you wear a nose clip?" he asked his father.

"I don't need it, any more than I need the verses from the Arabic holy book, the Koran, which those Arabs wear as a charm," said his father, grinning. "Don't you see we have a shark charmer here to protect the men on this boat? Give him these coins, Dhan, and then I'll begin my diving."

The shark charmer, a rather surly-looking man, Dhan thought, stood on the deck taking coin after coin from the divers, who made little enough as it was from their hard and dangerous work. His job was far easier than theirs, for all he had to do for his pay was to sing and chant while they dived below.

"Does he really do any good?" Dhan whispered to his father.

"Hush, Dhan. If he should hear you he might send a shark to my side of the boat instead of keeping it away."

But the shark charmer had not heard. He was too busy arguing with a poor diver who declared he had not enough to pay for protection.

Dhan's father held in one hand a basket for oysters, fastened to a long rope. He stood on the edge of the boat, taking a big breath which filled out his chest like a barrel. Then he pinched his nostrils together with the other hand and hooking his toes firmly into the loop of a rope which was tied around a heavy stone, was lowered by his com-



Dhan's father held a basket for oysters

panion into the grey water and then disappeared from sight.

It seemed to Dhan that his father was a long time down in those mysterious depths of water. Really it was barely a minute before he gave the signal rope a jerk, and came floating up to the surface again with his legs bent like those of a huge frog. Pulling more on the rope, the watcher soon hauled up a dripping basketful of muddy oysters which Dhan's father had pulled from the bed in those few seconds. The watcher dumped them into their common sack.

Dhan's father wiped his dripping, muscular body with a rag, and rested a few minutes to get his breath before he dived again. By this time the sun was well up above the horizon, and the sparkling dancing water didn't look nearly so dangerous as it had before. Dhan could even peer down into it a little way now, as he lay on his stomach on the deck, and see the rope wavering down into distance.

All morning the divers worked, each man taking his turn to go down while the other pulled on the rope. At noon the government officer came around in his launch, stopping at each fishing *dhoney* to climb on board and fasten and seal the muddy sacks, so that no one could hunt for pearls until after he had reached shore.

"It seems queer to think there are pearls inside those ugly muddy shells," Dhan said.

"It doesn't seem queer to me," answered his father, lying down wearily on the deck, ready to sleep during the long trip home. "When we reach shore the oysters will be divided. One third will go to the divers and boatmen and the other two thirds to the government. If I had time to open each of my oysters I might some day happen to find a large enough pearl to make me rich. But it is better to sell them unopened, and be sure of making some money each time."

Dhan's father and his companions, and the Arabs wrapped in their striped *burnouses*, all looked like big bundles of cloth flung on the deck. Everyone was tired and no one spoke much; while the tug chugged ahead busily and the sun slid lower down the hot cloudless sky. Presently the tug stopped, and the long strings of fishing *dhoneys* cast loose. Each boat at once spread sail, and now there began an exciting race to see which would be the first to reach shore.

Everyone woke up now, for each boat was anxious to win. The blue boat was the first to touch the sand, and Dhan gave a cheer.

"Come along, boy," cried his father, shouldering his heavy sack. "Each diver wants to be first to get the pearl oysters into the enclosure where they will be counted and divided!" And he hurried up the beach.



II

THE HOME UNDER THE COCONUTS

Coconut palms played an important part in the life of the little town where Dhan and Mayna lived, and indeed everywhere in Ceylon. Mayna sometimes wondered how people managed in other countries where coconut palms did not grow. Shade and food and drink, oil to burn in lamps and to smooth Mayna's sleek dark hair — almost everything one used was a gift from those tall friendly trees.

The tiny house where Mayna and her brother and father lived was built of coconut trunks and dried mud, with a thick thatch of the giant leaves for its roof. Even the little fence which protected the small plot of chili peppers to be

eaten with their rice, was made of the strong ribs of the coconut leaves. The little brown baby who had just come to the people in the mud house across the road was sleeping in a cradle woven of string made from coconut husks.

Mayna had learned to tell the time by the long palm shadows which crept farther and farther across the sand as the sun sank lower. By watching those shadows she would know when it was time to start a fire of the coconut husks which Dhan had collected in a big pile, ready to cook the rice and chilies for supper. Dhan and her father would be hungry when they came back from the oyster fishing.

Ever since her mother died, most of the household tasks had fallen to Mayna. For so small a girl, she had learned to be a good cook and to take care of the house very well.

Today, with Dhan and her father both away, Mayna had plenty of time for once to amuse herself. She decided to take a walk round the town and see what was going on. She wandered from one street to another, interested in everything around her. She saw merchants unpacking their wares and arranging little shops in the shade of trees. She saw farmers arriving in bullock carts from far out in the country, bringing extra supplies of food for all the thousands of newcomers who had flocked here for the pearl fishing season. She watched the snake charmer and the basket-trick

man and the traveling juggler. At last, feeling tired, she curled up under the shade of a big tree which had been made into a place for people to leave their sun-umbrellas when not in use. Now it looked like a new kind of tree covered with strange fruits.

As she sat there she saw a juggler who had just come to town. He was tossing brass plates high in the air, sending them whirling and spinning around his head like so many bright flashing suns.

"Oh, that's nice," Mayna cried, clapping her hands. "I wish Father would find a big pearl one day and be so rich he'd never have to work any more, but could juggle brass plates instead. It must be fun!"

She looked admiringly at the gorgeous gypsy, but he only scowled at her and turned away. Then he sat down in the doorway of his crimson tent and began to smoke, while a gypsy woman went around with one of the plates to collect money from the little crowd who had been looking on. She paused on her way to say: "This is work too, little girl. We all hope to find a pearl when we come to Pearl Town."

She carried the money to the man and returned to Mayna's side.

"You are a diver's child, are you not?" she asked.

"Yes, and my name is Mayna. What is your name?"

"They call me Ramagini," the woman answered, smiling down at her. "I see the *dhoneys* have nearly reached shore, and I want to buy an oyster or two. Perhaps if I'm lucky I may find a pearl. Do you know how much your father charges for his oysters?"

"I don't know," said Mayna, "but we can ask him when he comes home."

"Hush, don't speak so loud." The gypsy woman glanced over her shoulder. "The juggler would be very angry if he knew I had kept any money for myself. But I've been dancing for hours in the hot sun, and I have certainly earned it."

The oyster fleet was returning. Already they could see the fishing boats close offshore, the shining water foaming at their bows. Their brown and white sails were flapping like the wings of great birds. Mayna led the way to the beach.

Nearly everyone was running toward the shore. Cingalese merchants in bright *comboys* and little caps, or with long hair twisted into knots and held in place with combs shaped like the crescent moon; Arabs in striped *burnooses*, officials and agents and policemen who had come to busy Pearl Town to help keep order during the fishing season; gypsies, dancers and priests, waving umbrellas and moneybags and all shouting "*Sippi, sippi!*" This word, which means oyster, was on everyone's lips like a magic charm.

“Was it a good catch? Were there many oysters?” people were asking one another in great excitement as they hurried along. The amount of this first catch was important, for the divers would go out day after day as long as the supply of full-grown oysters lasted.

Now the black and brown divers were leaping ashore, and Mayna caught sight of her father. His bare strong-muscled shoulders glistened as he carried the heavy dripping sack of oysters balanced on his head. Dhan was close at his heels.

She called out: “Greetings, Brother! Were there many pearls?”

The gypsy woman beside her laughed and said: “Who can yet tell that, before the oysters are opened? But certainly there are many *sippi*!” And Dhan called back excitedly: “Run and buy a palm leaf bag, little sister. When the oysters are divided we can help our father sell his share.”

The divers were all carrying their sacks into an enclosure of bamboo fencing. Here there were many booths, each booth numbered for one of the boats. Dhan was not allowed inside, but the minute the oysters were divided and the opposite gates were opened by the official, the divers came swarming out like ants, each carrying his share of oysters and anxious to sell them as quickly as possible.

Seated under a palm tree with Dhan on one side and



Dhan was close at his heels

Mayna on the other, their father would hold up a muddy shell and bargain with one of those people who could only afford to buy one or two oysters at a time. It was very exciting for every one, for no one knew when a small, or even a large pearl might be found. Oftener of course there was nothing but an oyster inside the shell.

"Give me one oyster, little girl, and be sure to choose a lucky one," said Ramagini, the gypsy woman, turning between her fingers one of the magic charms which hung around her neck.

"I wish I could be sure," answered Mayna kindly. But it hardly seemed possible to her that one of those ugly shells could contain anything as lovely as a pearl.

The woman gave her a small coin, and sat on the ground to open her oyster. Her hands were trembling so with excitement that she cut her finger a little. But she didn't find even a tiny pearl though she searched ever so carefully.

"I will buy one more," she cried, and Mayna handed her one of the biggest oysters in the sack. But there was nothing of value inside this one either. The woman looked angry, her big black eyes flashing as she said: "You are a stupid child!" She threw down her shells in a temper and hurried away.

Meantime Dhan and his father had been bargaining with

other buyers. Soon all the oysters were sold and there was a nice little collection of coins tied in a cloth. "It looks as though we'd be rich when the diving season is over," said Mayna with shining eyes.

"Oh no, Mayna, it really isn't much. Remember what we make must last us a whole year, or even longer should there be no pearl fishing next year. Take this and hide it carefully in a hole in the ground of our hut," whispered her father. "Dhan and I must go to the bathing tank to wash the salt and mud off our bodies in fresh water."

Pearl Town was at its prettiest and most exciting at night. Every one was in from the water, and all the entertainers were doing their best to make the people spend money. Dhan's father could not resist spending nearly half of the coins which Mayna had buried so carefully, and he generously gave each of the children a share.

There was the sound of music and excited shouting. People were advertising their wares for sale. There were dozens of new and tempting delicacies to eat, shows to which one could go, dancers and performing animals, jugglers and Indian fakirs of all kinds.

"All these flaring torches make night almost as bright as day," said Dhan to Mayna. They were walking along eating some coconut candy, which they had bought with their

very last bit of money. "What do you think we should do?"

"It's almost nine o'clock," answered a strange voice at his side, "and the government auction of pearl oysters is about to begin at the courthouse. Would you like to go and look on?"

"Is that where all these rich merchants are going?" asked Dhan.

The man nodded. "I am going there myself, though I haven't much to spend. My name is Pinla and I'm a merchant from the city of Colombo. I travel a great deal to buy and sell pearls. I have children at home, and one little girl just about the size of your sister here." He turned to Mayna with a friendly smile. "What is your name, little one?"

Mayna told him, shyly smiling back. She wondered what the other little girl looked like. Maybe this man would bring her to Pearl Town. What fun they could have together!

Dhan was thinking about Colombo. It was the capital of Ceylon, he knew, and a very busy port. He imagined it to be something like Pearl Town, only a great deal bigger. Ever since all these strangers had come to town Dhan's mind had been running upon far-off places. More than anything else, he felt, he would like to travel, to see the rest of the world. Dhan made up his mind to ask this stranger all about Colombo, if ever he got the chance.



Margaret Ayer-

There were dancers and performing animals

The courthouse was crowded, but the three found a place at the edge of the throng where they could see and hear what was going on. Dhan was very excited over the auction sale and the bidding, but Mayna soon grew tired and confused with all the noise and shouting. Her head began to nod, and she was almost asleep when Dhan shook her gently and said: "We are going home now."

"Look me up in the town tomorrow, Dhan," said the merchant, "and I will tell you more about the pearl business."

The next morning Dhan didn't go with his father to the fishing fleet, but fell asleep the moment the noise of the signal gun and tom-toms had died down.

Next day the town looked very mussy and untidy. Oysters were being opened all over the market place and the smell of rotting oysters filled the air. Now and then some one would find a pearl and rush off to drive a bargain with one or another of the merchants who sat under awnings or umbrellas ready to buy or sell.

Dhan and Mayna watched their new friend Pinla grading small pearls in little sieves, or weighing them with delicate scales. He sat cross-legged on a matting beside a table about a foot high. Once they saw him carefully peeling a pearl with a slender little instrument.

"It looks like a tiny onion," said Mayna wonderingly.

"It's only an imperfect pearl," answered Pinla, "but when I have peeled away enough outer skins, you will see it as clear and beautiful as a drop of dew." He held up the pearl for the children to admire and then locked it away in a brass box at his side.

Next to him was a turbanned man with a three-legged stand. On top of this was a kind of bow drill which he twirled skillfully.

"He's making holes in tiny seed pearls for a necklace," explained Pinla. "Some lady of Colombo will be proud to wear it!"

"I have a necklace of red seeds, but perhaps a pearl necklace would be prettier," said Mayna.

"And cost a great deal more," said Pinla with a smile.

"Here come the boats," cried Dhan, who had been watching eagerly for the last hour. "I must go and help father sell his oysters. I hope he got a good lot. Come on, Mayna. Goodby, Pinla, we will come and see you again if we may."

As they walked down the sunset-tinted street toward the shore a mocking voice called: "Hello, water turtles!"

Dhan and Mayna turned and saw an Indian boy, watching them. He belonged to one of the traveling juggler troupes. Dhan already knew him by sight.

"I don't like that boy," he whispered to Mayna. "He

doesn't look honest. Don't you answer him, and I'll make an ugly face instead. That'll teach him to mind his own business!"

He screwed up his face, making the most unpleasant expression he knew how, as they walked along. "Was that ugly enough, Mayna?"

"Ooo-h," said Mayna, a little surprised herself. "I didn't know you could look so awful."

"That'll teach him," Dhan muttered again.

But they had not seen the last of the Indian boy. A little later, as Dhan squatted by his father's side while they bargained over the oysters, a thin black arm shot out from the shadows, a hand quick as a monkey's paw snatched one of the biggest oysters and disappeared. It happened so swiftly that Dhan's father, busy with a customer, never saw the movement. But Dhan did. Thrusting his bag of oysters into his father's lap he dashed after the Indian boy, who was dodging away into the darkness.

The boy heard his running footsteps, and glancing over his shoulder as he ran he bumped into a palm tree and fell headlong. In a moment Dhan had caught hold of him, shouting: "Thief!" and was pounding him heartily, while the Indian boy kicked and bit and squealed, calling Dhan "son of a rat" and other rude names.



Margaret Ayer

In a moment Dhan was pounding him heartily

Mayna could see them now tumbling about on the sand.

"Look, Father, Dhan's fighting with a thief!" she cried. But her father was too busy to notice what she said, so she jumped up and ran toward the beach. Just as she arrived the Indian boy, who was getting by far the worst of it, tossed Dhan the oyster sulkily and ran away.

"He tried to rob us," Dhan said indignantly. "Most likely the oyster is no good, but I wasn't going to let him keep it."

"Are you hurt, Dhan? Your nose is bleeding and you look terrible," said Mayna anxiously, as they walked back.

"It doesn't hurt much. Here, take the oyster, and I'll run and catch up with father and have a swim in the divers' tank."

As her father had finished his selling for the night, Mayna tied the oyster in the band of her *comboy*, and went home. There she put it carefully aside in a corner of the house, meaning to tell her father about it on his return. But that evening she forgot, and many things were to happen before she thought of the oyster again.

Next day, when the pearl fishers returned, her father was not among them. Accidents happen very often to oyster divers, and this time one had happened to him. One of his fellow divers brought the sad news to the two children waiting on the shore.

“Alas, your father never came up from his last dive,” he told them, gently. “I am afraid you will never see him again.”

Dhan tried hard to be brave and to comfort Mayna. He wondered sadly what he could do to earn a living for himself and his little sister, now that they were all alone in the world.





III

MAYNA'S OYSTER

At length the pearl-fishing season was almost over, for by now the divers were only able to bring up three or four full-grown oysters at a dive. The whole town was littered with oyster shells. The once pretty grassy meadows were trampled and brown from many passing feet, while the smell of rotting oysters filled the air.

But Dhan had found a job which brought him a little money every day. Mayna could see him near a special shed with a dozen brown men, leaning over a dugout canoe.

None of them wore any clothing excepting loincloths and perhaps a turban; and a man in a sun helmet, holding an umbrella over his head, stood guard.

The canoe was half-filled with water and rotting oysters. It had been standing in the hot sun for ten days until there was nothing left inside but shell and slime — and perhaps pearls. Dhan and the other men threw out the empty shells one by one and felt about, rinsing and kneading the remains to try and find any pearl, however small, which might be hidden there.

The workers were not allowed to wear clothes, for fear one of them might find a pearl and try to hide it for himself. At the end of the day the guard would even search their ears and mouths before they were allowed to go. But poor Dhan felt so disgusted by the bad smell and unpleasantness, that the few small pearls he found did not seem beautiful to him.

Every day more and more people were leaving Pearl Town to return to their own homes and Dhan watched them sadly, wishing he and Mayna could go away too. When he finished his work with the rotting oysters he decided he would bathe and go to see his friend Pinla the merchant, and listen to stories of the cities to the south. He knew he would miss Pinla when that kind friend had to leave.

While Dhan worked, Mayna wandered about taking a last

wistful look at the booths and tents that would soon be gone. For all these people — the jugglers and gypsies, the merchants and candy-sellers — had come to Pearl Town only for the fishing season, which was now at an end. Already they were preparing to pack up and leave. How lonely the town would seem without them!

She stood at the edge of a field watching the gypsies breaking camp. They were folding their crimson tents and packing their belongings to be ready for an early start on the morrow.

Mayna yawned, and sat down in the shade of a palm. Everywhere the unpleasant smell of rotting oysters filled the air; there seemed no place where one could get away from it. "Even at home it smells of oysters!" she thought disgustingly, wrinkling up her small nose. Suddenly she remembered the oyster Dhan had given her the night he quarreled with the Indian juggler boy. "That's what I've been smelling," she thought. "It's been lying there all the time. I'd better go home and throw it out while I think of it."

She ran back to the house. There was the oyster in the corner where she had hidden it. It smelled dreadfully. Mayna was just going to throw it away when, on second thought, she decided to look through it first. The shell was gaping a little, and she found a sharp stick with which to pry

it further apart. She hunted carefully through the dirty-looking oyster meat, as she had seen people doing so many times.

But the sight of the opened shell reminded her again of her father. He had died the day after he fetched this very oyster up from the deep waters, and at the thought of him hot tears came again into Mayna's eyes. One of the big drops fell right into the open oyster. Suddenly Mayna gave a jump and poked eagerly with her finger. For it seemed as if the tear drop had turned solid there before her astonished gaze!

There were many stories told about how pearls were formed. Mayna remembered hearing once that they came from tear drops. Perhaps it was true. She tried to cry again into the messy oyster, but somehow no more tears would come.

She wiped the pearl she had found on her *comboy*, and held it to the light. Mayna knew very little about pearls, or what they might really be worth. To her this pearl looked a little dingy. It was certainly a pearl, but she had no means of telling whether it was a good one or not. She wished Dhan were there, so that she could show him her find. It would be worth some money, at least.

"I think I'll show it to the gypsy woman who was so

anxious to find a pearl that night," she thought. "Perhaps she'll give me one of her pretty bracelets or earrings when she sees this."

Mayna found the woman strapping a heavy basket, while a small brown child wearing nothing but an amulet hung around its neck, stood clinging to her skirt. "Maybe she'll give me a magic charm, too," Mayna thought hopefully, for the gypsies sold charms and amulets to many people.

Running up to her Mayna said breathlessly: "Will you give me your pretty earrings and a magic charm if I give you a pearl?"

But the woman thought that Mayna was only joking.

"I will not. Run along, I'm busy."

"Then will you give me your brass anklet?" Mayna asked.

"No. I'll call the curse of the witch-mare Yakka to carry you off, if you bother me any more!"

The gypsy leader, her husband, was sitting on the ground, arranging the peacock feathers in his gay turban. He paid no attention to what was going on.

"All right, I'm going," said Mayna, somewhat disappointed. "I only thought you might like this pearl. You wanted one before." She opened her little brown hand just a moment, so that the gypsy woman could catch a glimpse of what lay inside it, and darted away.



Margaret Ayer—

"Will you give me your pretty earrings?"

The woman dropped her basket with a crash which made her husband shout angrily, while the baby began to wail. She dashed after Mayna, calling: "Come back, little girl! Maybe I will give you my earrings or some charms. Come back and we'll see!" But now Mayna didn't believe her, and still afraid that the gypsy woman would send the witch-mare Yakka after her, she dashed into her hut and slammed and bolted the door. How could one tell if a witch-mare were following, when one hadn't the least idea what it might look like!

She crouched in a corner, wishing Dhan would hurry and come home. Outside she could hear the woman's voice, very gentle now and coaxing, offering her all kinds of pretty things if she would only show her the pearl again. But Mayna wasn't going to be fooled. At last the woman went away, and Mayna, still trembling, hid the pearl carefully inside her blouse.

The evening shadows were at their longest when Dhan came home. "Open the door, Mayna," he called impatiently. "Why are you hiding in the dark like one of the little cousins of the crocodiles?" This was their name for the tiny lizards which hid in the crevices of rocks or scrambled about on the house walls to catch mosquitoes and other small insects. "Hurry! I have a big piece of news for you!"

Mayna ran to open the door, lit the coconut lamp and sat down by his side. She wanted to tell him about the pearl, but Dhan was too excited over his own news to listen to anything else.

"We're going to travel," Dhan cried. "A gypsy woman called to me as I was coming home and said: 'You are the diver's son who has a sister named Mayna, aren't you?' And when I said I was, she asked if we'd like to join their band. 'We're going south to the big cities,' she said, 'and we could use another boy and girl to help with the animals.' "

Mayna's head was in a whirl. This was more exciting than anything she could have imagined, news important enough to put everything else out of her mind.

"Dhan, how wonderful! Oh, I'm so glad! It's dreadful staying here in Pearl Town now that Father has gone. I'd much rather go somewhere else."

"So would I," said Dhan. "Now we'll see all sorts of new places. The gypsies never stay in one place long. Pack a basket with our clothes, Mayna. Old Achmed the Arab says he will give me two rupees in silver for the house and beds and cooking pots."

Dhan went to their secret hiding place under the floor to dig up their little horde of money, while Mayna packed.

Next morning they were off early, with the jingling cara-



Margaret Ayer

"Take care, young Dhan"

van of gypsies and bullocks. The merchant from Colombo waved to them from his little stall, and Dhan and Mayna ran over to say good-bye.

"I hope that some day our paths will cross again," said Pinla kindly, "and that some day Mayna, who is so like my little daughter, will have the necklace of pearls she's always wanted." He playfully shook the little chain of seed pearls he had been stringing, never suspecting that Mayna already owned a pearl larger and finer than any in his shop.

She had forgotten it herself in the excitement. The gypsy woman, Ramagini, caught her by the arm and hurried her away, lifting her on to one of the bullocks. "There, you can ride because your legs are too short to walk fast," she said.

"Good-bye. May blessings stay with you, my good friend," Dhan called, and the merchant said good-bye and whispered: "Take care, young Dhan. Don't trust the gypsies too far. They are dishonest people and you must always be on your guard with them."

Dhan nodded, and ran quickly to take his place with the men at the head of the little procession. The gypsy leader scowled at him, and said warningly: "Do not make too many friends along the way, boy. That's not the way to do business."



IV

WITH THE GYPSIES

The caravan made its way along the coast, stopping at every town or village where there seemed a chance to make money with fortunetelling and entertainment. When a big enough crowd had gathered to watch the dancing and juggling, Mayna was sent around among them to beg for coins. When she didn't bring back enough, Ramagini slapped her and called her stupid, though Mayna could never see that it was her fault. How could she make people give money unless they wanted to!

The gypsy tents were gay and bright-colored, but not very

clean. The gypsies themselves bathed only once in a while, when they felt like it, instead of every day as Dhan and Mayna had always done. There were even fleas in the tents, which came from the poor little trained monkeys who spent most of their time scratching.

But in spite of discomfort it was very wonderful and exciting to Dhan and Mayna to be really traveling, to sleep each night in a different place and to see new scenes and faces every day.

When they made camp it was Dhan's job to help put up the tents, feed the animals, and fetch water from the nearest fresh-water tank, for in this part of Ceylon the only drinking water is to be found in these reservoirs, some of which were built by the Cingalese kings hundreds of years ago. The water bags, made of goat skins, were large and heavy, and often Dhan had to walk quite a long distance with them.

One day as he was coming back to camp, the water bag over his shoulder, Dhan saw Ramagini talking to Mayna, and he slipped quietly behind a tree to listen. Though the gypsy woman seemed friendly enough when she was not scolding, Dhan remembered the merchant Pinla's warning, and didn't quite trust her.

She was offering Mayna a bracelet, saying: "I'll give you this if you'll let me have another look at your treasure!"

Mayna reached inside her dress, and held out a little object on her brown palm which made Ramagini gasp, her black eyes eager and greedy. She snatched a glittering necklace of brass shells and coins from her own throat and was just about to thrust it into Mayna's hands in exchange when suddenly the music burst out and the crowd which had gathered in the bazaar began shouting eagerly; while cries of "Ramagini, Ramagini, where are you?" rang out.

"Hide that carefully and come with me. I have to dance now," the woman said as she ran back to join her companions.

Dhan stepped out from hiding, and caught Mayna's wrist before she could follow.

"What's that you've got? I thought that woman was too mean to part with her necklace!"

Mayna unclenched her hand and showed him the pearl, glimmering in the sunlight. "It's only a pearl I found in that oyster you took from the juggler boy," she said. "Let me give it to Ramagini. I'd much rather have her necklace. The necklace is beautiful!"

She looked ready to burst into tears.

"No, no, Mayna. Wait," Dhan whispered. "That pearl would buy us the whole caravan if she were honest! Why didn't you tell me about it while we were in Pearl Town? Pinla would have bought it, and paid us a fair price. Now

let me take care of it till we reach some big city, where there are merchants. Don't let the other gypsies know anything, and you pretend to Ramagini that you've lost it."

Mayna gave the pearl to him, a little sulkily, and Dhan wrapped it in a piece of silky banana leaf, as merchants wrap food in the markets. Then he pinned it with two large thorns inside his shirt. Through the days that followed that tiny package worried him day and night. A pearl is so small that it is hard to take care of safely. Sometimes Dhan felt that it was actually burning through his skin, and other times he would suddenly be in a panic lest it had dropped out; and would run off by himself to make sure it was still safe.

When Mayna told Ramagini that the pearl was lost, the woman went into a fury, and made her hunt everywhere. She herself even searched through every inch of Mayna's clothing, shaking it out piece by piece. As long as there was a chance to get the pearl for herself she hadn't wanted the other gypsies to know anything about it. But now in her excitement she told them, and everyone joined in the search. They refused to break camp till it was found, and hunted in the dust hour after hour, while curious townspeople squatted around as near as they dared to come, anxious to know what all this commotion was about.

The gypsy leader, whose name was Babu, scowled at Dhan suspiciously. He said: "I believe you know as much about this as the girl does. See that you bring me the pearl before nightfall, or it will go ill with you."

He looked so fierce that Dhan said hastily: "I have keen eyes. If you give me a few more hours to hunt perhaps I can find it."

Mayna was in the womens' tent, really frightened now and weeping as she grubbed about the floor in her pretended hunt, for she dared not give up the search as long as anyone might be watching her. Dhan crawled under the edge of the tent from behind, his finger on his lips. "Hush! Don't speak loud, Mayna, but listen. That man Babu suspects I have the pearl; he is sure to search me, and when he doesn't find it I'll get a beating. But a pearl like that is worth a dozen beatings, and we musn't let him have it. Where can we hide it?"

Mayna sat back on her heels, thinking hard. "There are all kinds of folds and seams in the tent, but they're sure to hunt through those. And there is the little monkey's collar. Could we hide it under that?"

Dhan shook his head. "A good place, but it would be sure to drop out if he scratches himself." He stared at his little sister from the sole of her foot to the tip of her sleek head

with its thick black hair. "I wish you had more hiding places on you," he said. "Do you think we could hide it in your hair? Maybe they wouldn't think of looking there, for they've searched you once already."

"We could try," whispered Mayna, still frightened. "Oh, Dhan, we must hurry and do something before Ramagini comes. She may come in any minute and catch us both here."

Dhan tore off a small scrap of cloth from his already ragged *comboy*, and twisting the pearl inside, managed to hide it with shaking fingers under one of Mayna's black braids. It was the best they could do.

And not a moment too soon, for Ramagini poked her head in, saying: "What are you doing here, Dhan? Go out and help in the packing; we can't stay in one place forever, or we won't make enough money for food. You, Mayna, take off your clothes. I'm going to hunt through them once more before I give up."

And she did, while Mayna stood whimpering and frightened, expecting every moment that Ramagini would clutch at her hair.

"Well, you don't seem to have it anywhere, but if you and Dhan don't find it for us within the next few days, we'll drop you from the caravan and you can starve by yourselves.

If the pearl is really lost you are no more use to us, and you eat more than you are worth. We are going all the way to Kandy, in the south, where all the crowds will be gathering for the festival of Buddha's Tooth. We can't be burdened with a couple of useless children."

As soon as they had a chance to talk alone, Mayna told Dhan what Ramagini had said. "Don't worry," Dhan whispered back. "Something may turn up to help us before then, but I do wish we could go as far as Kandy, too. I've heard merchants in Pearl Town talking about that festival. It's a grand sight and everyone goes to it who can. We might find some merchant there who would be helpful to us."

But Mayna, nodding drowsily from the back of the little humped bullock with the red and blue painted horns, hardly cared. It had been such a long and frightening day, and all she wanted now was to drop off to sleep.





V

DHAN MAKES A FRIEND

The caravan was now headed inland. It was very hot traveling, for a great deal of their road led through forest, where the thick trees and undergrowth shut off all breeze from the gulf. Dhan and Mayna, who had lived all their lives by the sea, felt stifled and miserable in the close inland air. At night, when they camped along the forest track or by some small village, it wasn't much better, for the children had to do most of the hard work and the gypsies, Babu especially, scolded them continually for their laziness, even when they did their best.

Food was scarce too, and the children often went hungry to bed. The gypsies relied a good deal upon what vegetables they could manage to steal from cultivated fields when the villagers were not looking, or on small animals and birds they might snare along the way.

Wild ducks were to be found sometimes on the ponds or water holes, and Babu had a special trick for catching them. He would set one or two clay pots floating on the pond while he hid himself quietly among the reeds near shore. After a little while the ducks would get used to the pots, and pay no attention to them, but settle down again to their feeding. Now was Babu's chance. He had one clay pot with a peep-hole in the side. This he would slip over his head, and moving quietly through the water managed to grab one duck and sometimes two by the leg before the rest of the flock took fright and flew squawking away. It was Dhan's job to go with him to carry the heavy pots and bring the ducks back. But he was lucky if he got so much as a bone to gnaw after they were cooked.

The children found that the gypsies had many different ways of making money. They gathered herbs and plants of various kinds, and made charms and medicines supposed to cure illness. The women were clever at weaving baskets and pretending to tell fortunes. Besides Ramagini, using

a needle and the juice of a certain plant, could tattoo patterns on the upper lips or foreheads of the village girls, who admired this kind of ornament and would willingly stand the pain for the sake of looking stylish. But though the villagers found the gypsies exciting and liked to gather round the tents to watch the juggling or have their fortunes told, they were always a little suspicious of them, and took very good care to guard their own belongings as long as the caravan remained.

There were four big fierce dogs to guard the camp. At first these dogs were unfriendly to Dhan and Mayna, but after a while they came to feel that the children were part of the troupe. All excepting the biggest and oldest dog, whom the gypsies called Garu-the-Black.

Garu-the-Black would give a low throaty growl and the hair on the back of his neck would lift whenever Dhan or Mayna came near. Both the children kept well out of his way.

"It is strange that we can make friends with all the animals except old Garu," said Dhan.

"They say Garu-the-Black has witch's blood in his veins," said Ramagini, shaking her head. "You had better leave him alone. We are all a little afraid of him!"

Old Garu was sly. When the gypsies camped for the

night he would go out marauding around the neighborhood and help himself to anything from a live chicken to a roasted goat.

One day, however, he got himself into trouble and came back to camp with a deep cut on his shoulder. As he limped along, showing his fangs, no one dared go near him. But Dhan felt very sorry to see the old warrior so badly hurt.

Garu threw himself down on the ground a little way off from the tents, near the spot where Dhan was eating his own supper. Dhan watched the dog as he twisted his head around to try and lick the ugly wound.

"I know you're a bad old thief, but still I'm sorry for you," he said. "You haven't eaten anything all day. Have a bite of my supper, and we'll see if I can't make you a bit more comfortable."

The dog lifted his head suspiciously, ready to growl, and Mayna called from a distance: "Come away, Dhan. It isn't safe to go near Garu. He is angrier than ever, and he may put a curse on you."

"Nonsense, Mayna. Don't you think that even a witch-dog is glad to have someone be kind to him? I don't blame the farmers for throwing a knife at Garu when he goes around stealing. But I'd like to get that cut fixed if I can. Go away please, and leave us alone."



"Have a bite of my supper"

Mayna went back to her supper and Dhan kept on talking soothingly as he crept slowly inch by inch nearer to the great dog. It took patience, but by the time the stars were out Dhan had fed Garu, washed and dressed his wound and made a powerful friend in the gypsy camp. "See, I have only one small bite on my hand," he told Mayna proudly, "and Garu didn't mean to do that; he only snapped because it hurt him to be washed."

One day when they were camped on the edge of a town, the gypsy leader Babu said: "Come with me, Dhan, and be sure you do exactly as I say. You have an honest face which may be useful." He went to his tent and returned carrying a staff and a small basket tied in a cloth. "This is our food in case we get hungry," he told Dhan with a wink.

They walked into town, Dhan feeling a little uneasy for fear he would be mixed up in some mischief, but he was afraid to disobey.

Babu took Dhan down the street and paused beside the largest house he saw. Crouching down in the shadows of a bush, he placed his turban on the end of a stick and held it up in front of a window.

But though the turban looked like a man's head, no one took any notice. "It seems they are away from home. Perhaps at the market place watching the gypsies dance," said

Babu with a grin, but he tried another window just to make sure.

“Now you must climb inside and see what you can find, and I will stay here and make a noise like a nightjar bird if I see any one coming.”

“Oh no, I won’t do that, it would be stealing!” cried Dhan, holding back while Babu tried to push him forward.

“So you’re too honest to earn a living in the gypsy way, but you’re not too honest to eat the gypsies’ food,” the man hissed in his ear. “Do as I say, or you’ll live on water for a week, and I’ll give you the worst beating you’ve had yet!”

He turned on Dhan fiercely, ready to carry out his threat then and there. Luckily just at that moment they heard the sound of footsteps in front of the house, and without more ado Babu clutched Dhan by the arm and ran away with him as fast as he could go.

“Very well, boy,” he said, as soon as they had put a safe distance between themselves and the house. “If you don’t like that, I’ll show you an ‘honest’ way to enter a house, if one is clever enough to do it.”

When they came to the next house he walked up boldly and knocked at the door. It was opened by a servant in a white *comboy*. Babu said to him: “Tell your master that I smell a dangerous snake in his house. If he’ll give me a rupee

I'll come in and catch it for him. That will please him."

As he spoke Babu made sniffing sounds with his large, hawklike nose. His eyes looked unusually bright and piercing as he glanced here and there until even Dhan began to feel uneasy, though he suspected it was all a trick.

"My boy is a good sniffer, too," Babu said, and added to Dhan in a loud voice: "While I go one way, you go the other, and if you smell a snake, call to me."

"All I smell is curry," muttered Dhan, as the servant went away to speak to his master. "How could I smell a snake even if there is one?"

"Easy enough, if you want to eat the gypsies' food," hissed Babu warningly, and he pinched Dhan's arm so hard that the boy began sniffing at once.

The owner of the house wasn't any too pleased to see the so-called snake charmers at his door. But when he heard Babu's loud sniffs and saw his rolling black eyes he began to feel a little nervous and said that they could come in and hunt if they wanted to.

While Dhan went prowling round the house obediently in one direction Babu went in another, darting here and there and sniffing fiercely as he pretended to search. Suddenly he gave a shout, and pouncing into a dusky corner of a large room held up triumphantly a small wriggling snake.



"All I smell is curry," muttered Dhan

“Don’t come near it,” he warned. “It is a very harmful kind!” And taking the rupee which the trembling house owner offered him he hurried with Dhan from the house and back toward the gypsy camp.

“But why don’t you kill the snake?” Dhan asked, puzzled by the whole performance.

Babu laughed. “Kill it? That would be a silly thing to do. This little snake is my friend and helper. I brought it with me.” And opening his little basket he slipped the snake carefully inside and closed the lid.

When they were safely back in camp, Dhan heard Babu telling the story to his friends, while from his turban, his shirt and his *comboy*, he took a number of small valuables he had managed to pick up from the house when nobody was looking. “Now it is time for us to move on to another town before the good master discovers the loss and comes to find me,” Babu said with a chuckle.

Dhan was very worried, and thought: “It will never do for Mayna and me to live with these rascals! We must surely leave them at the next big town!”

But before the children had a chance to run away, something else happened.

Dhan and Mayna, who had been used to water all their lives, were always very glad when they had a chance for a

bath. One day the women and babies went to a nearby tank to bathe and Ramagini told Mayna that she might come with them. They bathed with their clothes on and kept a sharp outlook for crocodiles, for this tank was out in the wilds on the edge of the jungle.

Mayna was terrified of crocodiles, and was sure she had caught a glimpse of one of the big monsters lurking under the water, so instead of venturing in with the others she stood on the bank, dipping up water with half a coconut shell and pouring it over her body. Ramagini came over to her.

“Why do you never wash your hair?” she asked. “You children of Pearl Town used to be so clean that it was almost foolish!”

Mayna turned her eyes away and said nothing, for the real reason was that she was afraid of losing the pearl.

Ramagini looked at her suspiciously and suddenly exclaimed: “Ah! I think I can guess the reason! Your hair used to be as sleek as a crow’s wings, and now it looks like tangled coconut husk! Come here, girl.”

To Mayna’s dismay, the woman drew her behind a tree where the other women couldn’t see and quickly ran her fingers through Mayna’s hair. She felt the little wad of cloth with its precious burden and jerked it out. “A-ha! You

could not fool me for long," she said, gazing with shining eyes at the beautiful pearl which lay in her hand. "See that you do not tell another person that I have found it. I shall sell it in Colombo and be rich."

"But if you keep it you are stealing something which belonged to me," whispered Mayna. "Please give it back to me, Ramagini, and I will give you part of our money when Dhan and I sell it."

"You speak foolishly, child. What is a part when one can have the whole? If you tell anyone that I have it I will feed you to the crocodiles!"

Mayna didn't really believe this dreadful threat. Nevertheless she was frightened. When Ramagini continued: "Run along now and join your brother who has been sent to get wild honey. Follow the trail to the left." The little girl scurried away gladly enough. She ran quickly, her bare feet pattering over the fallen leaves and twigs, for the forest trail seemed lonely and full of the forest spirits.

Soon she heard Dhan's cheery whistle and caught a glimpse of his plaid *comboy*. There he was, standing under a hollow tree around which swarmed many big golden-colored bees. Dhan was planning to smoke them out. It isn't easy to steal honey from a swarm of Cingalese bees and he was making his preparations slowly and carefully.

“Ramagini sent me here,” Mayna told him. “Something dreadful has happened, Dhan! She noticed that my hair was tangled and that I didn’t wash it, and she found the pearl. She said if I told any one she would throw me to the crocodiles! What shall we do, Dhan?”

“She shan’t hurt you!” said Dhan angrily. “But we had better go back and pretend you did not say anything, and I will try to get the pearl back secretly some time. As soon as we have it, we had better leave these dishonest gypsies for good and all.”

The sun was still high when the children started back to camp, Dhan carrying on his head a bamboo tube stuffed full of honey.

“We must be almost there, but I cannot see the tents nor the animals,” said Dhan, beginning to walk faster. They walked quite a long distance and still saw no sign of the gypsies.

Then Dhan said, “I can’t be mistaken about the place. There is the old water tank where the women were bathing and here is the tree with the yellow-flowered vine where I slept last night. Here are the ashes of a campfire! Mayna, the gypsies must have gone!”

Sure enough, they had gone away and left the two children alone on the jungle trail. Dhan and Mayna stood still

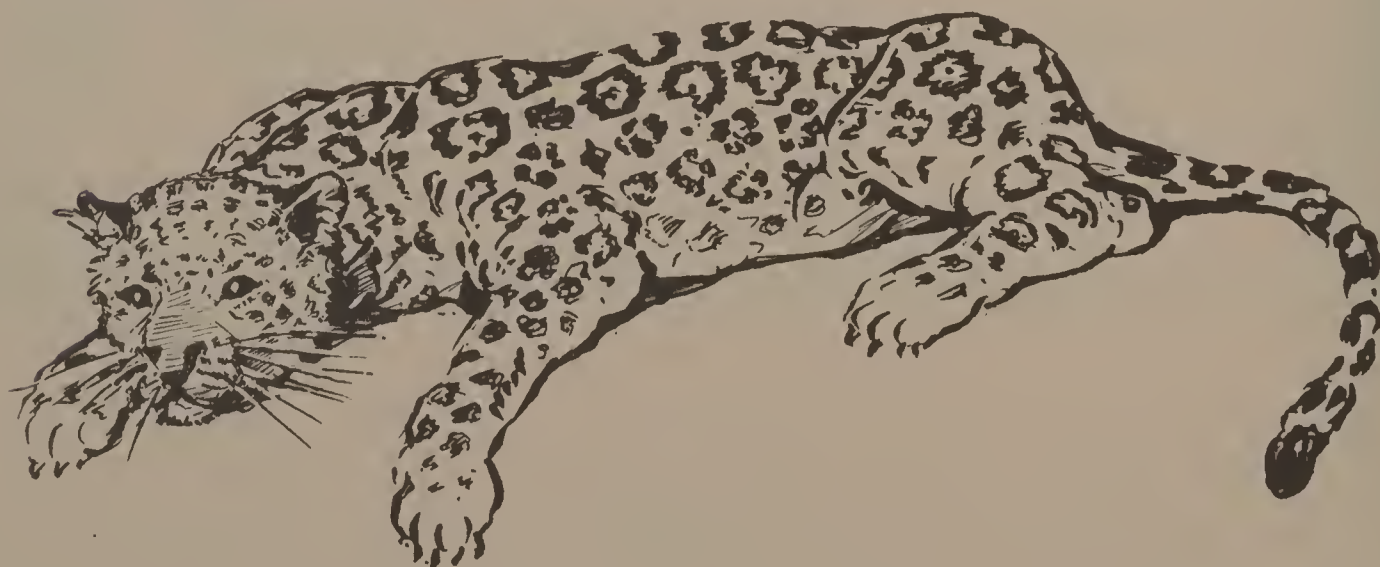
and called and listened, but there was no answer excepting the mocking sound of a cuckoo bird calling "Ku-il, Ku-il — who be you?" and a Bulbul bird which cocked his head at them from a nearby tree. He had a tuft of black feathers on top of his head like a Cingalese gentleman's topknot of long twisted hair.

"Oh, Dhan, I'm afraid of 'Great Ones'!" whispered Mayna. "Do you suppose there are any near here?"

"There may be," answered her brother, "The Great Ones are so powerful and swift they can go everywhere, but if one were coming or even feeding nearby we could hear him. Don't fear the elephants, my sister. It is such creatures as leopards we must fear when the sun rides to its rest. If we cannot reach a town before dark we will sleep in a tall tree."

Dhan broke a pronged stick from a nearby bush and thrust it into the ground, hanging two leaves in the crotch. "There, that is a charm which will please the wood god and perhaps he may help us."

And Mayna looked a little comforted.





VI

THE IRON DRAGON

The children walked along a narrow roadway over which trees arched, shutting off half the sunlight. Vines and creepers were festooned like ornamental chains. Chattering monkeys swung here and there and peered down at them curiously, or scurried startled into their leafy homes, disappearing almost as though by magic.

"Too bad we frighten the monkeys so much," said Mayna. "Listen, Dhan, doesn't that sound like a man pounding on brass or tin?"

They stood still to listen to the "wok, wok, wok," but Dhan decided it must be only the coppersmith bird.

Woodpeckers tapped and pecked on other trees and a paradise flycatcher, with a white tail four times as long as his body, flew by overhead. The Cingalese call this bird the cloth-stealer because it looks as though it were flying away with a long piece of cotton cloth.

Once Mayna had to jump out of the way of a snake, and bright-eyed lizards scurried over the rocks or basked in the heat. It was very hot, almost suffocating, and Mayna and Dhan were glad they didn't wear many clothes. Great velvet-winged butterflies — black, red, and white — fluttered about; and small gnats and stinging insects rose in clouds from the bushes.

"My feet are growing tired, Dhan. When shall we come to a town?" asked Mayna.

"I cannot say," he answered. "Bullocks travel much faster than humans and I am afraid we cannot overtake the gypsies. Look, the sun is riding down to its rest and the shadows are at their longest!"

Dhan didn't say much for fear of frightening Mayna, but now he was growing uneasy, because he knew that night was the time when the animals came down to the water holes to drink. There would be timid deer and bold elephants, slinking wildcats and perhaps a wild buffalo, the fiercest of all, although it was cousin to the tame fat animals which



Dhan climbed ahead, giving Mayna his hand

drew the plows and worked so patiently on farms in Ceylon. All the animals would be on the watch for one another, for there are many animal wars in the jungle.

"Here is a nice comfortable-looking tree, Mayna. Its wide branches look like cradles. If there are monkeys in it, they will not hurt us." Dhan climbed ahead, giving Mayna his hand and hauling her up onto the biggest branch. He tore away a flowering vine to make more room, and with it a great many ants, some of which stung his hands sharply. There are living creatures everywhere in the jungle.

"What will we have for supper?" asked Mayna wistfully.

"We are lucky," answered Dhan. "I still have this bamboo tube of honey and a piece of bread I saved from the morning meal and forgot until now." Once the bread had been in the shape of a large pancake, but now as he untied it from a corner of his *comboy* it was broken into several pieces. However, it looked good to the hungry children, and Dhan divided it and with a twig smeared each piece with honey.

The shadows were creeping up around them, first stealing across the ground and all the low places; then they moved up the trunks of trees, and last of all touched the topmost branches which had been tipped with golden sunshine. The

birds were silent, and the monkeys moved down onto the warm rocks to sit as though gossiping together, while they hunted fleas in one another's fur. To the children they seemed like companions.

Suddenly from a distant rock came the warning call of a sentinel monkey, to be picked up instantly by the other monkeys far and near. Chattering furiously, they sprang up into the trees for safety, for something was coming which had a better right to the lower regions of the forest. Mayna looked down, and clutched Dhan in terror, while he tried to look as brave as possible. But it was only a bright-eyed deer which paused a moment sniffing the air with its wide nostrils and then darted away. The strange scent of human beings had frightened him as much as he had frightened Dhan and Mayna, for wild animals have keen noses and their sense of smell is their protection.

Mayna curled up in the notch of two branches with her head against Dhan's shoulder and was soon asleep. Dhan, though he lay awake and watched for a while, glad that it was a moonlight night, fell asleep too in spite of his strange wooden bed and his cramped position.

The next morning as the sun rolled up over the edge of the world, the whole jungle roused to life. Birds began to flutter and call, insects to hum. The monkeys sat up on the

tree boughs where they had been sleeping, and reached out for seed pods to stuff into their greedy mouths. Sometimes they scolded and quarreled among themselves.

They were so noisy that Mayna was awakened. The little girl saw many mother monkeys leaping about, swinging on the rope-like vines, with their babies clinging close under their bodies.

Mayna began to feel more cheerful. The jungle seemed very happy in the early morning sunlight, and she thought that it must be fun to be a bird or a monkey and live in the big trees. But as she was only a girl and quite unused to sleeping on a tree bough, her legs felt very cramped and stiff. She wanted to get down on the ground and stretch them, only she was afraid of disturbing the jungle animals around her.

One grey-haired old monkey, squatting on a branch, was peering far out through the trees like a sailor watching from a mast, and Mayna looked too.

Beyond the jungle's edge she could see a space of clearer land, where trees had been cut down. There, stretching along on the ground side by side, lay two long ribbons of silver, shining in the sunlight. They looked very strange and queer, stretched there motionless. Mayna stared in wonder. Presently she touched Dhan's shoulder.

"Wake up, Brother. I can see something very queer out there."

Poor Dhan had been dreaming that he was caught in a trap, and was glad enough to wake up and stretch his aching limbs. He rubbed his eyes, staring in the direction where Mayna pointed, but shook his head.

"I cannot imagine what it is. Let's pick some nuts for breakfast and then go and see."

Soon the children were eagerly pushing their way through the tangle of trees and bushes. From the ground they could no longer see the strange silver ribbons and so could only guess whether they were going in the right direction.

"I wish we could find a real road," sighed Mayna. "My feet are beginning to hurt already."

Just then, as though some kind woods fairy had answered her wish, the trees parted, and there beyond the opening lay a road, stretching straight ahead as far as eye could see. But what a strange road it was! Each side was bordered by a band of shining metal, and the metal bands rested upon logs of wood set a few paces apart.

Mayna caught her breath. "The silver ribbons, the silver ribbons!" she cried in delight.

They drew near to the strange, gleaming tracks.

"It looks like the backbone of a giant fish," said Dhan,

bending down to stare curiously at the great nails which held the tracks in place.

"Is it really a road?" Mayna asked eagerly. "Where does it go to?"

"I don't know," said her brother. "But it must have been made by men, so surely it leads to the homes of men. Let us follow it."

They stepped cautiously over the shining tracks, and began to pick their way along, stepping from log to log. This was a new kind of walking altogether, much easier than walking through the rough jungle, and more fun.

Presently they came to a huge tree which had fallen right across the track. There was no space to go around, so the children had to climb over it. Still hanging from one of the branches was a nest of leaves sewn together by the tailor bird, and the bird itself was fluttering nearby, giving plaintive calls of distress. Mayna had often seen these nests swinging high in the air from a tree bough, but she had never had the chance to see one close to. She stopped to wonder at this strange airy cradle. The leaves which made it were stitched neatly together with tough plant fibers, just as if it had been sewn with needle and thread.

A few yards farther on Dhan stopped short. "Listen," he said. "I hear something queer."

Mayna could hear it too, a low distant roar. At first the children thought it might be thunder, but the sky was clear. The roaring noise grew louder and louder, and the strange road under their feet began to shake and tremble.

"The Great Ones," Dhan cried out in terror. "It must be a herd of Great Ones coming!" And he dragged Mayna off the road to a hiding place behind a rock.

The roaring grew louder still, and now they could see in the distance what looked like a cloud of smoke above the tree tops. Fearfully the children peered out from their shelter. A great monster was rushing down the shiny road toward them — not an elephant, but something far stranger and more dreadful.

"It looks like a *naga*," Dhan whispered, remembering the carved and painted dragons he had seen on temple walls. "Surely it is a *naga*. Look at the joints in its body. It's puffing fire out of its head!"

Mayna stared, fascinated though afraid. She had heard of dragons, but never had she expected to see a real one! She clung breathless to Dhan's hand while the monster swept toward them.

The dragon didn't seem to notice them, and the children hoped it would go right past, but instead it slowed down, coming to stop only a few paces from the fallen tree.

There it stood, still snorting. Now that it was quite close, the children saw to their surprise that it was like a string of low houses all joined together, with many windows to them. Out of its joints people began to swarm like ants from an anthill.

Like the people in Pearl Town, there were brown-skinned men, women and children in bright *comboys* or with rainbow-hued *saris* or long cloths draped over head and shoulders. Some wore sun helmets or turbans. They walked over to look at the tree, all chattering in Cingalese, Tamil or Arabic. None of them seemed in the least afraid of the dragon on which they had been riding. Seeing this, the children took courage and crept out from hiding.

No one took any notice of the two ragged children; all were too busy chattering and staring at the tree. Suddenly Mayna caught sight of a man in a small round cap and velvet vest, standing with his back turned to them. Something about his appearance made her catch at her brother's arm. "Look, Dhan," she cried. "I do believe that is our friend Pinla, the merchant from Colombo!"

They ran forward. Sure enough it was the Colombo pearl merchant. He stared at Dhan and Mayna in amazement.

"How on earth did you come here?" he asked. "Where are the gypsies?"



Margaret Ayer—

It was the Colombo pearl merchant

"They stole our pearl and left us, and Mayna and I are lost and tired and hungry," Dhan said all in one breath, while Mayna clutched Pinla's sleeve as though she would never let him go.

"What's this about a pearl? Tell me everything that has happened," Pinla said. "But first come with me, and I'll find you some food in my lunch basket."

He moved toward the train, but Mayna held back.

"What is it? Is it really a dragon?" she wanted to know. "Dhan thought it was, and it makes such dreadful noises, and breathes real smoke!"

Pinla smiled. "It isn't really breathing," he told her. "That smoke is steam, from fires kindled by men. It is really just a big machine called a train, and if you come with me I'll show what it is like inside."

Two men in uniform were walking down the tracks in the direction from which the train had come. "They are going to get help to move the tree," Pinla said. "There is an elephant working on the road about a mile back, and he'll soon lift it off for us."

He led the way to one of the strange little rooms on the train, and the children climbed in after him. Inside it was just like a tiny house, with padded seats and awnings over each window to keep out the glare of the sun. He shared

his lunch basket with them and while they ate Dhan told him all their troubles, from the first finding of the pearl down to the time when the gypsies had deserted them. Pinla listened gravely, nodding his head.

"If only you had thought to bring it straight to me, foolish one!" he said to Mayna, smiling at her as she hung her head. "Never mind. Now listen. I am going to Anaradhapura, which was the ancient capital of Ceylon, to pay my respects to the sacred Bo-tree and to do some business with a merchant friend. We may meet the gypsies there, as they stop at nearly every large town, and we could get help from the police to recover your pearl."

"But if we cannot find them, Mayna and I will go hungry indeed," Dhan sighed. "We have managed to hide our father's savings from the gypsies but that money won't last long. Do you know of any work I could find in this part of the country?"

"You shall not starve," Pinla promised him. "I will make a bargain with you, little brother. If you get back the pearl, I will help you to sell it and you shall share the money with me, for it may be quite valuable. Until I have seen it, I cannot tell. In return I shall let you stay in my shop in Colombo and learn the pearl business. Even if you do not regain the pearl, you may come with me to Colombo just the same.

I think you are a clever boy and will make a good worker; and Mayna shall be companion for my own little daughter, who is as like her as one oyster is like another!"

Before the children had time to thank him they heard a great shouting and cheering outside the train and there was the elephant waddling into sight. A *mahout* dressed in loincloth and turban sat on the animal's powerful neck. He gave directions and the big intelligent creature lifted and dragged the huge tree off the tracks, using his strong trunk like a derrick and balancing the tree across his tusks.

It was interesting to watch the elephant at work, and before long the train was free to go rushing and snorting on its way. Though it seemed very queer and strange to be hurled through the forest so fast, Dhan and Mayna felt safe in Pinla's company. Besides there was so much to watch from the windows that they had no time even to think of fear.





VII

IN THE CITY OF THE PAST

When the train stopped at a station, Pinla called to a man who carried a hatchet in one hand, and in the other a stalk with several large coconuts. Pinla bought each of the children a coconut and the man chopped open the thick green outer husk and made a hole in the shell so they could drink the milky juice from inside.

Beside the station was a great heap of dried coconuts which a man was loading onto a bullock cart, and Pinla told them the meat of millions of coconuts was shipped abroad each year.

"Look at that poor old holy man sitting on that uncomfortable board," said Dhan. The holy man was dressed only in a few rags; he had long tangled hair and looked very thin. He held a wooden begging bowl, and several passengers who had stepped off the train for a few moments gave him a coin or two, even though some of them looked quite poor themselves.

"Go and give him this coin, Dhan," said Pinla, handing him an *anna*, "but be careful not to be left behind when the train starts!"

As Dhan jumped off the train, he noticed a basket seller standing near the Hindu holy man. Dhan wondered where he had seen the fellow before.

The man was watching the crowd around him. When he noticed Dhan, he gave an astonished start, scratched his right cheek with his left hand and darted away behind the little station building.

"That's the gypsies' warning sign," Dhan remembered, as he was about to drop his coin into the beggar's bowl. He glanced swiftly at the holy man, and stopped short, the coin still in his hand.

The engine bell clanged and Pinla shouted: "Come on, Dhan. The train's about to start!"

Dhan scrambled on board in time and Pinla said: "What

is the matter? You didn't give the man the *anna* after all."

"Some of the gypsies were at the station!" gasped Dhan. "That old Hindu beggar was really Babu. Do you remember, Mayna, how he could take off his peacock-feathered turban and fine clothes, smudge his face with charcoal and look just like a poor old beggar? The basket seller was another gypsy and gave him the warning sign when he recognized me. Can we go back and make them give us our pearl, Pinla?"

"I am afraid we cannot stop the train," said Pinla, "but we will wait a few days at the town of Anaradhapura where I am going to visit my friend Rama-dul. He is a merchant and I want to exchange some seed pearls for tortoise shell. I can sell the tortoise shell in Colombo to be made into combs and boxes and other pretty things. Anaradhapura is a place where travelers come to see the sights and very likely the gypsies will go there to make money by entertaining."

It was almost dark when they reached the city, and Pinla called a bullock cart with a thatched roof to take them to the home of his friend in the bazaar.

Lights were beginning to glow in the windows of rooms back of the small shops and in the air was a pleasant smell of curry and onions and coconut.

Rama-dul and his wife welcomed the newcomers kindly, and when Pinla had explained about the children, Rama-dul said: "Though I have four children of my own, there is always room. Mayna shall sleep in the string bed with the two eldest girls, and Dhan may sleep on a mat beside Pinla and myself."

Soon after breakfast next morning, Pinla said: "It is fitting that we three should go at once to pay our respects to the sacred Bo-tree."

The holy tree grew in the temple yard, which was surrounded by a wall. At the entrance Pinla bought three lotus-flower buds which looked something like large pinkish fruit. "We will take these temple flowers as offerings to the sacred tree," he said, handing one to each of the children.

The Bo-tree grew on a mound, with its gnarled and twisted old branches supported by poles. Around it fluttered many little three-cornered flags which had been hung on strings by pilgrims. Yellow-robed monks strolled here and there about the courtyard.

"This is one of the oldest trees in the world," said Pinla, saluting it as though it had been an important person. "It was planted here, twenty-one hundred years ago, from a slip of the sacred tree in India under which the Buddha sat in thought. What splendid sights the old tree must have seen



Yellow-robed monks strolled here and there

in Anaradhapura long ago! This old city was once the magnificent capital of Ceylon."

The large leaves on the tree quivered gently, catching the golden light of the sun, and as Mayna carefully opened her lotus bud petal by petal and laid the flower at the base of the tree, one of the leaves fell on her outstretched hands. "Oh, look, this must be a blessing for me!" she exclaimed, picking it up carefully. For to the Cingalese people each leaf represented a prayer, and any pilgrim would have been glad to have one.

Dhan pointed to a flock of dainty yellow butterflies soaring away over the temple wall. "Where do you suppose they are going?" he asked.

"No doubt on a pilgrimage to the Holy Mountain. They are called *samanalaya* which means holy mountain pilgrims. Every year they migrate in thousands."

"Where is the Holy Mountain?" asked Dhan. "Is it the same that Achmed the old Arab called Adam's Peak? He said that Father Adam had to stand there for hundreds of years as a punishment, before he was allowed to go across to Mecca to bring his wife Eve to Ceylon."

"That is one story which the Mohammedans believe," said Pinla. "But there are other stories as well. Thousands of pilgrims go there every year, for on the top of the moun-

tain is what seems to be a huge footprint. The Hindus believe it is the footprint of the god Siva. Here he stood and stirred the sea with his trident to make the waves. The Cingalese say it is the footprint of Buddha. There is a shrine built there, and last year I myself made the pilgrimage."

"I wish I could go," said Dhan. "What did you see from the top?"

"I felt as though I were looking at half the world spread around the foot of the mountain and at sunrise I beheld the wonderful shadow of the peak on the morning mists. It looked like the spirit of another Adam's Peak, through which I could faintly see the distant rivers and valleys.

"But it would be too hard a climb for such short legs as yours and Mayna's," he added. "You must wait until you are older. The last part of the climb I made up the face of the steep cliff, clinging to an ancient chain and iron ladder. No one knows who put them there, though the Arabs would tell you that the links of the chain which fasten the ladder to the rock were forged by Father Adam himself. It is called the Chain of the Creed, for at each link one says a prayer."

Pinla said it was now time to go back to the bazaar, so bowing once more to the ancient tree, they left the temple court-

yard. They passed a public bathing pool, where men and women were washing clothes, pounding them on the rocks to get them clean. Tortoises with outstretched necks sat sunning themselves upon the near-by banks, and small boys waded near the shore, trying to catch the tiny fishes that darted here and there.

Part of the city of Anaradhapura was very beautiful. Near a lake stood a big hotel for foreigners, which looked to Dhan and Mayna like a palace. But in contrast to the new buildings were many strange old ruins standing about, half overgrown with jungle trees and vines.

Of an evening, before bedtime, Rama-dul and Pinla sat smoking while they told the children stories of the days of long ago when Anaradhapura was the capital of Ceylon. After many wars were fought the capital was changed to Kandy, in the mountains. But at length white men from a country called Portugal conquered Ceylon and made a seaport the capital, naming it Colombo after a Portugese discoverer named Christopher Columbus.

"Do these people from Portugal still own our country?" asked Dhan.

"No. Ceylon is now part of the British Empire," said Pinla. "But I see that little Mayna's head is nodding, and it is time to stop talking and go to bed."



"It is time to stop talking and go to bed"

Wherever they went during their stay in the city, Dhan kept a sharp watch for the gypsies. But he saw no sign of them. At last Pinla said: "We will have to be on our way tomorrow."

Early in the morning before any one else was awake, Dhan thought he would take a last walk through the ruins of the ancient city.

Broken stone columns, which had once been part of a splendid palace, rose like a mysterious stone forest. Rain-trees, unfolding their broad leaves, dripped dew upon Dhan's head. In a distant field, big-horned water buffaloes and other cattle were grazing, and there were tortoises everywhere.

As Dhan walked, he thought of the past, imagining the glittering spires of temples and palaces, the buildings and busy streets thronged with soldiers and merchants and jugglers, king's elephants and horses in gorgeous trappings, just as it had been thousands of years ago.

"Perhaps the spirits of some of those priests and people are still here," thought Dhan with a shiver. "Maybe they wouldn't like a modern boy!"

He stood staring at a beautiful old carved stairway leading nowhere, and suddenly thought he heard soft, padding footsteps behind him, as loud as those made by bare feet.

"I do hope it isn't an evil spirit," thought Dhan, thrusting a leaf into a forked stick as he had done in the forest.

But perhaps that wouldn't be enough for this mysterious creature. Dhan had heard that sometimes people had to build a fire, and utter certain chants. But as he didn't know exactly what to do, he walked quickly on, hoping for the best. A moment later he stood stock still, holding his breath at the sight of some little brown figures darting about on the road directly ahead of him.

Dhan laughed when he saw that they were only monkeys, playing leapfrog over some fallen columns, while one big monkey sat apart like a sentinel, keeping watch. At sight of Dhan the big monkey gave a warning cry. At once they all disappeared amongst the trees, as much afraid of Dhan as he had been of them.

Dhan walked on, but again he heard the ghostly footsteps in the underbrush and imagined breathing close to his side. He backed up against a bell-shaped *dagoba* monument and said in a small, frightened voice, "Come out where I can see you, if any one is there."

And without further warning something did leap from the bushes, knocking poor Dhan flat on the ground. He felt something wet against his face and looking up was glad to see it was only a big dog.

Dhan sat up. "Why, Garu-the-Black, it is you — the gypsies' dog!" he exclaimed, patting the shaggy head. "How I wish you could talk, for the gypsies must be somewhere near here and I want to find their camp. Then we can get back our pearl."

Garu-the-Black wagged his crooked tail, but would not lead the way. His only thought seemed to be to take a walk with his friend Dhan. Whenever Dhan stood still, he would sit on his haunches with his tongue hanging out and wait patiently.

Dhan wandered here and there, peering about, while the sun climbed higher and the shadows of trees and columns grew shorter. Once he saw some red flowers and thought for a moment it was the scarlet of the gypsy tents. He felt safe enough now, for it seemed that even a spirit would be afraid of so big and fierce a dog as Garu.

It was very hot and Dhan knew that Pinla would worry if he didn't go back. So he turned toward the town, and had nearly reached the outskirts, when Garu-the-Black darted away and disappeared almost as though by magic.

"Where have you been, boy?" demanded Pinla, when Dhan, hot and dusty, walked into the shop.

"I am sorry if I have worried you, Pinla. I would have been back long ago, but I saw the gypsies' dog and have

been trying to find out where they have their camp so that we can get back our pearl."

"You are braver than you are wise," said Pinla. "What could one boy do against so many? Instead we will employ some policemen, and search the neighborhood thoroughly."

The two policemen, though imposing persons in uniform with their big turbans and their leggings, could not find the gypsies and neither did they see Garu-the-Black again. So there was nothing for Pinla and the children to do but go on their way, in hopes they might meet the gypsies at the great festival in Kandy.

"They are harder to find than pearls in oysters!" said Dhan disgustedly.





VIII

THE FESTIVAL OF THE SACRED TOOTH

It was a long journey to Kandy. On and on through the mountains rushed the snorting train, winding so much that sometimes Dhan and Mayna could see the end of it, like the tail of a dragon, though Mayna laughed to think that once she had really thought it was one.

"But suppose we should fall off these strange, high places you call mountains!" said Mayna, who had never before seen anything but flat country. "Would we not roll into the rice fields or tea plantations and be hurt?"

"Wheels are more sure than feet when they run on iron rails," said Pinla reassuringly.

Sometimes whole mountainsides were planted in rice, some fields already velvety green with the growing blades, others, as yet unplanted, shining like a mirror.

"How can they keep all that water on the steep hillsides?" asked Dhan.

"If you look closely you will see they are terraced with little embankments around each field, to keep the water in," Pinla told him.

"They look like giant staircases," said Mayna.

The tea plantations were not so beautiful, for the bushes though laid out in orderly rows, had little color, and all the fine forest trees had been cut away to make room for them. Only one or two black stumps sadly stood guard. But the women with baskets who picked the tea were dressed brightly enough, with their colored *saris* and beaded ornaments.

The three travellers saw a graphite mine where the men, climbing up from a pit with baskets on their heads, were covered with black dust and shone as though made of polished metal.

"The graphite will be sold to make pencils, like the one I gave Mayna one day," explained Pinla.

At one station Mayna noticed some little girls carrying books under their arms and umbrellas over their heads,

whom Pinla said were probably going to school. Nearly every one carries an umbrella in Ceylon. Many of these are white and some are made of giant palm leaves.

The next day Pinla and his friends reached Kandy, the prettiest city in Ceylon, and Pinla said: "We are lucky, for it is the full of the moon and the month when they hold the yearly celebration and procession of the Sacred Tooth, so we shall see it! Look how crowded the streets are with pilgrims and visitors. Keep a sharp outlook now, children. We might see the gypsies at any time."

But there was so much to see that it was hard to remember even such an important thing as a stolen pearl.

"Where are all those people going?" asked Mayna.

"Into the Temple of the Tooth," answered Pinla. "Come, let us follow them."

This was the finest and most important temple in all Ceylon, for here was kept the supposed tooth of Buddha, a very sacred relic to the Cingalese people.

The courtyard was buzzing with the voices of worshippers, all wearing their finest holiday clothes. There were many yellow-robed priests, and huge gaily-decked elephants which had been brought in for the festival. The air was heavy with the fragrance of temple flowers. Heat waves danced and shimmered over painted walls and bare white



Margaret Ayer—

There were huge, gaily-decked elephants

stones. An ear-splitting noise of tom-toms, blare of conch shell horns and squealing of pipes was heard, and everywhere were the bobbing umbrellas.

"There is a Kandyan Chief," whispered Pinla. "How would you like to dress like that?"

The Kandyan chief was a big man with a bushy black beard. He wore a blouse with short puffed sleeves, long white pantaloons and yards and yards of silk cloth wound around his waist so that he looked enormously fat around the middle. On his head was a jewel-encrusted hat almost as gorgeous as a tiny temple.

"He looks very hot in spite of those servants carrying fans and umbrellas," said Dhan.

That night as they stood waiting for the wonderful procession to begin, they could see the roofs of the Tooth Temple glittering in the moonlight. Inside the courtyard were at least forty elephants in gorgeous trappings, swaying and crowding one another and swinging their great trunks back and forth.

"Here they come! Here they come. Make way for the temple elephant! Back. Back," shouted the crowd excitedly, though every one pushed forward as far as he dared, for a good look.

The temple elephant, biggest and handsomest of them all,

led the way. He carried a splendid howdah on his back in which was the Tooth in a jeweled shrine. His mighty tusks were cased in silver and over his head and face he wore a kind of armor of silver and jewels. Above him towered a gorgeous embroidered canopy, supported on poles carried by men who walked on each side of the elephant.

Other elephants followed, on which rode the headmen and chiefs of Kandy and the neighboring villages. They carried baskets of flowers and silver umbrellas. To the noise of conch shells, brass cymbals, tom-toms and pipes, frantic dancers and drummers whirled around the forty elephants. The dancers were great bearded men, wearing full ruffled skirts, wide belts of shining silver, hats of shining brass, nose ornaments, shoulder ornaments, bracelets and beads.

Coconut husk torches burned with a strange shifting light which made everything look like an exciting dream, and Dhan and Mayna yelled and cheered and jumped up and down with excitement along with the rest of the crowd.

Only the elephants were quiet and dignified, but nobody could tell what they were thinking. "Probably they are very proud of their splendid trappings," thought Mayna, while Dhan was thinking what fun it would be to ride on top of one like a chieftain.

The glittering, noisy procession at length wound away

out of sight and the crowd began to thin. Mayna, who was clinging to kind Pinla's big hand, thought how cool the bluish moonlight looked on palm leaves and walls and houses, now that the wild, flickering light of the torches was gone.

She spoke in a half-whisper as she said: "Isn't it quiet now! But Pinla, where is Dhan?"

Pinla stood still. They looked around, but could not see Dhan anywhere. A few dark figures were strolling away in various directions and a bullock carriage rattled out of sight. But of Dhan there was no sign.

"He couldn't be lost, for he was right by my side only five minutes ago," said Pinla, and he and Mayna called, "Dhan, Dhan, where are you? We are going home to the rest house!" There was no answer.

"He may have followed the procession," said Pinla at last, "but that will go on for half the night, over miles and miles of Kandy's streets. I know your short legs are already tired, Mayna, so we will not try to go after him."

It was true that a few minutes before Dhan had been standing beside Pinla, looking with interest at the mixed crowd of people around him. People of a dozen different nations were chattering in as many different tongues.

Dhan was just wishing he could understand what a tall



He ran after the carriage and jumped on the back

white woman was saying to her escort, a yellow-haired Englishman in uniform, when he heard a soft voice close to the Englishman's side saying: "Like I tell lovely lady nice fortune?"

The man shook his head, but the soft voice continued in Cingalese: "Sahib and Miss Sahib please buy charm to make always very fine luck?"

"No, no," said the man. "Go your way, gypsy," and the pair moved on. Looking around quickly, Dhan recognized Ramagini in her bright, full skirts and jingling ornaments. He saw Pinla and Mayna already half across the street, but Dhan's one thought now was to overtake the gypsy and demand that she give him the pearl.

She was hurrying away and paused to signal a bullock carriage to stop, so Dhan began to run through the crowd. Ramagini was already in the carriage, the driver had clucked to his little humped bullocks and they were just trotting away when Dhan came panting to the curb. He waved his arms and shouted, but no one took any notice. So he ran after the carriage and jumped on the back, clung to the joggling wooden frame like a monkey, while his thoughts moved faster than the bullocks' hoofs.

"Probably Ramagini wouldn't give me the pearl even if she has it with her. She'll no doubt go to the gypsy camp,

so I'll sneak along behind her and try to find out where she keeps it."

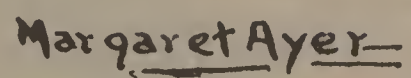
At the edge of a moonlit field, where the dark forms of tents and grazing animals could be seen, Ramagini called to the driver to stop, and climbing out, argued a few minutes about the price, taking a small coin from her little embroidered sack.

Dhan rolled off the cart and lay very still on the ground while the woman hurried across the field. He could see the gypsies gathered around a small fire, and he slipped quietly around the edge of the field, now and then dropping flat on his stomach like a cat and crawling carefully forward in the shadows.

The dogs were the greatest danger. Several of them began to bark as he drew nearer, but Babu roared at them to be still. Only old Garu-the-Black, who had no fear of anything, would not obey and with fur bristling and fangs showing, advanced growling across the field.

Dhan lay still until the dog was quite near and then called quietly: "Garu, good dog. Do not be angry, it is only your friend Dhan. Good dog, do not bark!" His heart was pounding fast. What if old Garu did not know him in the dark!

Garu still advanced, cocking his ears forward. At length, just as Dhan's courage was beginning to fail, the dog stopped



growling and walked to Dhan's side wagging his crooked tail.

The moon had sailed down the sky as far as the tip of the nearest hill by the time Dhan had finally skirted the field and lay crouched beside the biggest crimson tent, listening to the voices inside. Garu-the-Black had gone back to his place on the edge of the camp, for this was the leader's tent and there was no love lost between Babu and the old witch-dog.

Babu was talking to Ramagini and though they spoke low so the other gypsies couldn't hear, both their voices sounded angry.

"I know this cannot be all the money you made today, Ramagini," he said. "When you opened your purse I saw the gleam of silver, and now there is not a silver coin here!"

"It is nearly all I made, O Babu. Am I not to keep a little for myself when I have worked for it from morning, all through the heat of the day until moonrise and later?"

"No," cried Babu unfairly. "Give it to me!"

"No, no," protested Ramagini. "It is mine — I earned it! Let go my wrist, you are hurting me!"

Dhan wished there were a hole through which he could see what was going on, but could guess very well what was happening.

Babu must have snatched the purse and pushed Ramagini

away, for she fell back against the tent near Dhan, making it bulge alarmingly. Dhan shrank back, afraid she would break through and find him.

Babu was rattling the remaining coins in his hand and exclaiming: "You are a clever woman. There is more here than I expected! O-ho, what is this? A dirty piece of rag pinned to the inside of the purse!"

"Leave it alone! Don't dare to touch it! It is a dangerous charm!" shrieked Ramagini, plunging forward.

But Dhan could see Babu's great shadow on the other side of the tent, holding his arms high. "I have seen, O Ramagini. It is the pearl belonging to the diver's children. You have no more right to it than I. But you may go on with the caravan, telling fortunes and selling charms, while I am going by train to Colombo and sell this pearl. Then I shall be a wealthy gentleman and need never work again!"

With a laugh of triumph, Babu dashed from the tent, with Ramagini at his heels.

But Dhan didn't wait to hear any more. He slipped away from camp and ran, ran as fast as his legs would carry him toward town.





IX THE PEARL

When Dhan reached the railroad station, panting and weary, there was Babu pacing up and down the platform, his hawklike eyes keeping anxious watch around him, while the station master sat nodding on a bale of tea near-by.

Dhan hid behind the ticket office, trying not to breathe too loudly while he racked his brains for what to do next. At any moment the train might arrive, and there was no time to find a policeman or get any help. So he waited, and before long he heard the distant rumble of the train and the toot of the engine.

The station master roused from his nap, and shouted to Babu: "The train comes, gypsy!"

The moment it stopped Babu jumped aboard, almost colliding with a man who was getting out at the same time, and once more the whistle tooted and the train started.

"I'll lose him again, perhaps forever," Dhan thought in despair. "If only Pinla and Mayna were here!" But there was no help for it, he must make up his mind quickly. So he made a dash, jumped on to the last car, and almost before he knew it was being carried rapidly down the tracks toward Colombo.

"What are you doing here, boy?" demanded the conductor angrily, when he found poor Dhan, still out of breath and clinging uncomfortably to the outside of the window frame.

"I can pay my fare if you'll help me inside," Dhan gasped.

"A strange way to board a train," said the man, hauling Dhan through the open window, and looking at his money a little suspiciously when the boy was safe inside. "Next time you'd better be at the station a bit earlier, or you'll get yourself killed!"

Dhan was thankful that Babu hadn't seen him. Now there would be a few hours at least in which he could rest undisturbed and collect his wits.



Dhan hid in the next doorway to watch

It was morning when the train reached Colombo. In all Dhan's dreams of seeing the great city, he had never imagined reaching it like this! His thoughts now were not on sight-seeing; his only desire was to follow Babu. The throngs of people and the busy traffic confused him at every turn, and it was all he could do to keep the gypsy in sight along the crowded streets. Dodging and twisting like an eel, Dhan followed as closely as he dared on Babu's heels.

White men and women, Arabs and little brown boys selling post-cards, Chinese coolies with their loads, ox-carts and rickshaws, bicycles and terrifying roaring automobiles — never had Dhan imagined such noise and confusion.

At length they reached the winding dusty streets of the native quarter. Here in the shabby little shops were the dealers in jewelry, tortoise shell and precious stones.

Following at a safe distance, Dhan watched Babu enter one shop after another. Each time he came out, he looked more and more worried and impatient.

The next time he turned to enter a shop, Dhan sidled near, and hid in the next doorway to watch. Babu did not stay long here, either, but as he left the shop the owner followed him out, saying:

"Come back at four this afternoon and I will see what can be done."

Then as Babu strode sullenly away the merchant called to a shop owner across the narrow street. "Come here a moment, my good friend. I want to consult you."

Dhan edged nearer, and heard the first merchant saying: "That gypsy had one of the best pearls I have ever seen, but I don't know whether I dare buy it from him."

"These gypsies are never to be trusted," the friend answered. "Perhaps the pearl is a false one, or if it is real it is undoubtedly stolen. You had best be careful!"

"When he comes back I will have someone here within call, who will know how to deal with him if there is any trouble."

Dhan slid quietly away. As he walked along he was trying to think out some plan, though his head was in a whirl. He felt sure that none of the grand Colombo policemen would pay any attention to his story, or even listen to complaints from a boy his age. He must act for himself.

Suddenly an idea came into his head. He had still a little money left. Counting it carefully over, he went into the nearest clothing shop.

A fat Hindu sat on a little raised platform smoking a water pipe, while a young Indian woman and her servant were examining a pretty rainbow-tinted *sari* spread out before them. A *sari*, as Dhan knew, is a garment worn draped

around the body and over the head. One could see very little of a woman wearing a *sari*, so it was important that the garment itself should be worth looking at.

As soon as the customer left the shop Dhan went boldly up to the merchant. "Will you let me see your cheapest *sari*?" he asked. "I want to buy one for my sister."

Cheap as it was, the *sari* took almost the last of Dhan's money. After nearly ten minutes' bargaining, he walked out carrying the bundle. Watching his chance, he slipped into a deserted alleyway between two buildings, and draped himself in the *sari* as well as he could. Taking small dainty steps like a girl, he made his way to a shop with a glass window and looked at his own reflection.

He could hardly believe that the reflection he saw was really himself and not an actual Hindu girl. He practiced walking back and forth, arranging the folds of the garment carefully, and a passing Cingalese woman turned to laugh at him and say: "Little sister, you are as vain as a peacock!"

Dhan was delighted that she had really taken him for a girl. The *sari* still felt very strange on him, and to get more used to the feeling of it he strolled slowly about, looking in at the shop windows as he went. Each window was like a glimpse into another country, for here were things from all over the world — China, Japan, Europe. There was so



Margaret Ayer

He practiced walking back and forth

much to interest him that he could have gone on looking for hours, but the striking of a clock in a tall tower reminded him that time was passing.

"It looks something like Pinla's watch," he thought, staring up. Dhan did not know how to read the time, so he had to ask a passer-by to tell him what the hour was.

He bought himself some round flat bread and a little fruit with two of his remaining coins, and at the time when Babu was to return was already waiting near the jeweler's shop, on the watch for him.

The moment he saw the gypsy coming down the street Dhan slipped into the shop, his heart beating fast. There he saw carved ivory, moon-shaped combs and bangles, bracelets and nose-rings and ornaments of every kind.

He laid his last coin, a silver one, on the counter, and asked in a timid little voice, as much like a girl's as he could make it, to look at a bangle. While he was holding it, pretending to examine it very closely, the gypsy came in, and the shopkeeper left Dhan at once and turned to Babu.

"So you've come back," he said. "I thought the police might have found you by this time."

Babu gave a guilty start, but drew himself up again boldly. He said: "The pearl is my own. I have come all the way from Pearl Town on the Gulf of Manaar, where I had the

good fortune to buy an oyster which held this beauty."

He laid the pearl on his great brown palm and held it out temptingly for the merchant to see, and the man leaned forward, his eyes shining eagerly.

Dhan was sidling closer, peeping out shyly from behind his *sari*, but no one took notice of an unimportant little girl. It was plain that the merchant was talking to gain time, and his eyes watched the doorway, while Babu grew more and more impatient for him to make up his mind. Just then two other men entered the shop, calling out a greeting to the merchant.

Dhan saw his chance now. He dived forward, snatched the pearl from Babu's palm and dashed like a squirrel through the open door almost before any of the astonished men saw what was happening. Right into the thick of the crowd he plunged, tripping up a boy with post-cards, twisting like an eel in and out between the people. Up one street and down another he dodged, narrowly missed being knocked down by an automobile. At last he paused for breath around the corner of a narrow alley, behind a palm tree. Here he tore off his *sari*, and then ran on again, for he could hear angry shouts drawing nearer along the streets, and the words "Hindu girl" sounded plain to his frightened ears.

At last he came to a quiet corner near an old temple, and

sat down on the well-worn steps to rest. He clasped the pearl tightly in his hot hand, still not daring to look at it for fear someone should see. Strange to think that he held such riches, and yet he was tired and hungry as a beggar, without one *anna* to buy food and no place to sleep that night!

"I wonder what Pinla and Mayna are doing now," he thought. "If only I could let them know where I am!"

And then he remembered. Pinla lived in Colombo. It was his home. Somewhere in this big crowded city, in the native quarter, there would be people who knew Pinla and could tell him where he lived.

Meantime, in Kandy, Pinla and Mayna had done their best to find Dhan. They searched everywhere, but could find no trace of him. At last Pinla said:

"Little sister, I can stay here no longer. I must get back to Colombo and my family, where my business is waiting for me. You had better come with me. We will leave word in the rest house here in case your brother returns, and I shall ask the Kandy police to keep watch for him. More than that we cannot do."

It was a sad and solemn little girl who followed Pinla to the train. Hour after hour Mayna stared silently out of the window, seeing nothing of the strange country that whirled



He sat down on the well-worn steps to rest

past her and blinking hard to keep back the hot tears in her eyes. Nothing, not even Pinla's kindness, could make up for losing Dhan. Now she didn't care where she went or what became of her.

At last they reached Colombo. Outside the big crowded station Pinla hailed a carriage, and they were driven straight to his home in the jewelers' quarter of the city. In the little shop his family greeted him eagerly.

"Wife, how glad I am to see you again! Marawasi, my little daughter, your eyes are like stars over the sea. And you, my elder daughter, have become more beautiful than ever. It is a wonder no Rajah has come to ask you for his bride!" And drawing Mayna lovingly forward, Pinla added: "This is Mayna, whom I want you all to love and cherish. I found her in Pearl Town, and she is indeed like a little precious pearl herself. From now on she will be one of our family, and a sister to our own little daughter."

The two little girls stood looking at one another shyly, and Pinla's wife said: "Well I know your charity toward all, good husband! But I have glad news for you too. There is one in our house now who has come from afar and has been waiting anxiously to see you."

As she spoke she drew aside a curtain, and there stood Dhan, smiling.

"You see I found your home, kind Pinla, and something else as well which will make you as happy as it does me!"

At sight of her brother Mayna gave a glad cry, and her little face broke into smiles like the sun rising over the sea. She clung to Dhan as though she would never let him go again, and it was plain that not even the sight of the wonderful pearl could add to her happiness. True that it meant comfort and riches, but what were these compared with the joy of finding her brother again, safe and sound!

Pinla laid his hand on Dhan's shoulder.

"I always knew you were a brave and clever boy, little brother," he said. "Now you must tell me all your adventures, and how you got the pearl back from the gypsies, while my wife and daughter prepare a feast for us all. After that we will talk business, you and I. I need a lad like you to work in my shop, and if you like the idea and are willing to learn, this pearl can be in truth the beginning of a real partnership, and of a secure and happy future for both you and your little sister. For more and more I feel it was a lucky day when you and I first met on the shores of Pearl Town!"







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